Fairbury Pioneer Farmers Faced Many Difficulties

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In the early 1800s, the conventional wisdom was that farmland was only valuable if it had trees and was located next to a creek or river. For this reason, early pioneer farmers first inhabited southern Illinois, close to the Ohio River.

The Fairbury area in the early 1800s was mostly swampland. Native Americans also inhabited the Fairbury area, primarily the Kickapoo. Until 1857 when the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad came through this area, farmers had no easy way to sell their grain or livestock. For all the above reasons, Livingston County was one of the last regions to be settled in the State of Illinois.

The first small batch of pioneer farmers settled in Livingston County, starting with Major Darnall south of Fairbury in 1829. Three years later, in 1832, the McDowell family settled north of Fairbury on the South Branch of the Vermilion River. These early farmers chose to purchase wooded areas on either Indian Creek or the Vermilion River.

One challenge for area farmers was crossing the Vermilion River. The 1878 Livingston County history book by Le Baron recounts the experience of one local farmer. This farmer had a wagon drawn by two horses, and he needed to cross the river. The river had been frozen for some time, and the ice was starting to break up. The farmer unhooked the horses from the wagon and placed both on a large block of ice. The giant ice block broke into two pieces as they started across the river. The horses' front legs were on one chunk of ice and the back legs on another. Very carefully, the farmer got all four legs of the horses on the ice block, and he paddled them across. The farmer then put the wagon on a large ice block and paddled it across. He hitched the horses back to the wagon, and the farmer went about his business.

In those early days, the nearest post office was in Bloomington. Postage on a letter was 25 cents, and the receiver had to pay the postage. The amount of 25 cents back in 1830 would be equivalent to $6 in today's money. Many early farmers had to wait until they finally accumulated the money to pay the postage.

The nearest grist mills for Fairbury area farmers to grind their grain were Green's Mill on the Fox River near Ottawa and the Crow Creek mill below Peoria. Pioneer farmer Mr. Moore recounted that he was gone for one week when he made his first mill trip. A new grist mill was constructed on the Kankakee River by Wilmington, but it was about as far away as the Peoria mill. There was no mill in Avoca Township until the erection of one after 1857 in Fairbury.

Some early settlers hauled their wheat to what is now Chicago. They considered themselves fortunate if they got paid 50 cents a bushel for the grain. There was no city of Chicago at that time, just a place full of bogs and marshes on Lake Michigan. Several farmers would join into a company, and they would drive their wagons loaded with wheat to Chicago. They camped out at night because they could not afford the cost of staying at a tavern for the evening.

The 1878 history book also recounted that some early farmers used their ox-teams to haul their products to Chicago. They also drove their hogs across the pathless prairie to Chicago.

Joseph C. Morrison, who frequently made the trip with a drove of hogs, explained how the drives were conducted. Several farmers would collect their pigs and start on the journey, agreeing to take turns feeding the hogs at night. Each farmer would have to return home to bring another load of corn to feed the pigs. By working together, the farmers could get the hogs to Chicago. This type of trip would have been impossible for one farmer by himself.

Once the slaughterhouse was reached, the hogs were dressed and put on the market. Those weighing 200 pounds and over were sold for $1.50 a hundred. Those hogs weighing less than 200 pounds sold for $1.00 a hundred. A farmer made but one trip each year and brought home the absolute necessities of life with him.

In 1856, the John Kring Sr. family moved north of Fairbury from Ohio. Their trip from Ohio took three weeks. They drove two wagons, each with two pairs of oxen. Shortly after they settled in Fairbury, John Kring and one of his sons had to make a trip to Chicago. They took Mr. Kring's $600 horse carriage from Fairbury to Chicago. After they reached Chicago, Mr. Kring was offered 160 acres of land if he would trade his carriage. When Mr. Kring checked the property offered for trade, he found it underwater. Mr. Kring decided he preferred his swampy Fairbury prairie land to the underwater Chicago land. That 160 acres now constitutes much of downtown Chicago and is worth millions of dollars.

Two technological changes then revolutionized farming in the Fairbury area. The first change was the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad laying its tracks from Peoria to the Indiana border in 1857. Once the railroad was in place, farmers had a secure method for obtaining needed farming supplies and a way to sell their farm products.

The second revolution was tiling the swampland to drain it. In the 1880s, most of the swampy farmland in the Fairbury area was tiled. There was so much demand for clay field tile that two area farmers started tile factories in Fairbury. These two tile manufacturers were Rufus C. Strait and James McDowell. Tiling the fields converted them from worthless swampland to some of the most productive lands on the planet.

Early Fairbury farmers faced some incredibly tough challenges, including trying to farm swampland and having no way to sell any of their farm products. They overcame these challenges until the advent of the railroad and field tile eliminated most of these problems.

Water-Powered Grist Mill
for Grinding Grain into Flour